The Transfiguration of Jesus Christ
(Article)

For we did not follow cleverly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For He received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to Him from the Majestic Glory, saying, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” And we ourselves heard this voice from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain.
2 Peter 1:16–18 (BSB)

Introduction:

The transfiguration of Jesus Christ is one of the most unique and significant events in the life and ministry of our Lord. As we see in the above passage, the older Apostle Peter shares his eyewitness account of the transfiguration in his second letter. The actual event of the transfiguration is recorded in three gospels (Matthew 17:1-13; Mark 9:1-13; and Luke 9:27-36) along with the above passage from Peter (2 Peter 1:16-18).

On an unspecified mountain (1) with three selected disciples (Peter, James and John), Jesus is visibly glorified, “transfigured” (from the Latin translation of the Greek work ‘metamorphoō’ - which means “to change into another form”). (2) While the change of Christ’s appearance is actual and physical, it is also part of a visionary revelation of Jesus’ divine glory originating in His incarnation (John 1:14). (3)

The following is an exploration of this event, as to what it means. There are four parts in total. The first three provide a commentary on the events as they are recorded in Matthew, Mark and Luke, and the fourth part is an expanded commentary on the later eyewitness testimony of Peter - along with further insights of the Apostle - recorded in his second letter (2 Peter 1:16-21).

The Transfiguration in Matthew 17:1-13

After six days Jesus took with Him Peter, James, and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light. Suddenly Moses and Elijah appeared before them, talking with Jesus. Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If You wish, I will put up three shelters —one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." While Peter was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Listen to Him!" When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown in terror. Then Jesus came over and touched them. *"Get up,"* He said. *"Do not be afraid."* And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, *"Do not tell anyone about this vision until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."* The disciples asked Him, "Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?" Jesus replied, *"Elijah does indeed come, and he will restore all things. But I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him whatever they wished. In the same way, the Son of Man will suffer at their hands."* Then the disciples understood that He was speaking to them about John the Baptist.
Matthew 17:1–13 (BSB)

Commentary:

The transfiguration as recorded in Matthew shows us how this event comes about. The "six days" (v.1) likely indicates how long it took to get from one place to another, in this case Jesus leading His inner circle (the disciples Peter, James and John) up to an unspecified "high mountain" (v.1). (4) The transfiguration of Christ's face shinning like the sun and His clothes becoming "as white as the light" indicates a change from the inside out, that is a change of our Lord's body Himself, becoming outwardly visible, providing them with a glimpse of his preincarnate glory (5) - and a taste of his future exaltation. (6)

The appearance of Moses and Elijah (v.3), as representatives of the Law and the Prophets, respectively, are important witnesses to Jesus Christ as the Messiah, since He is the one fulfilling the Old Testament (Matthew 5:17). (7)

As Peter is talking to Jesus, a “bright cloud” (v.6) envelopes them, which recalls the ‘Shekinah’ glory of God’s nearness to His people (Exodus 40:34); similarly, God expresses His closeness to Moses in a vision of God’s glory at Sinai (Exodus 31:18) and to Elijah at Horeb (1 Kings 19:8), yet now, Jesus’ transfiguration radiates the glory of His deity. (8) God’s voice coming from the cloud (v.5) reminds us of the event of Jesus’ baptism, where God likewise endorses Christ as His beloved son, thereby affirming our Lord’s deity and helping the disciples grasp His messianic purpose. (9)

As Jesus reassures them not to be afraid (v.7), He explains to them how the transfiguration (“vision” in v.9) relates to His pending crucifixion, death and resurrection. Along with admonishing the disciples to silence about His coming suffering - going down the mountain - Jesus’s glory is veiled. (10) In the last part (v.10-13) Jesus explains to the disciples that the messianic forerunner, Elijah, has already come, manifested in John the Baptist. (11)

The Transfiguration in Mark 9:1-13

Then Jesus said to them, *“Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God arrive with power.”* After six days Jesus took with Him Peter, James, and John, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There He was transfigured before them. His clothes became radiantly white, brighter than any launderer on earth could bleach them. And Elijah and Moses appeared before them, talking with Jesus. Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters —one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” For they were all so terrified that Peter did not know what else to say. Then a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and a voice came from the cloud: “This is My beloved Son. Listen to Him!” Suddenly, when they looked around, they saw no one with them except Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus admonished them not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. So they kept this matter to themselves, discussing what it meant to rise from the dead. And they asked Jesus, “Why do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?” He replied, *“Elijah does indeed come first, and he restores all things. Why then is it written*

that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected? But I tell you that Elijah has indeed come, and they have done to him whatever they wished, just as it is written about him."
Mark 9:1–13 (BSB)

Commentary:

The transfiguration account in Mark's gospel is similar to Matthew. Yet, in v.1 we have an important detail not mentioned in Matthew, which is Jesus' foregoing prediction being fulfilled in the transfiguration. (12) What should be mentioned here is that in extrabiblical Jewish literature, the expected Old Testament precursors are not Moses and Elijah - nevertheless, it is likely that the transfiguration narrative is reminiscent of Malachi 4:4-6. (13) Also, the Old Testament events surrounding Moses in Exodus 24:15-16 provide a close parallel to the transfiguration of Jesus. (14) The voice of God out of the cloud ("Listen to him") recalls Deuteronomy 18:15, 18 revealing Moses as a leader and prophet. (15)

As Jesus explains the significance of John the Baptist, fulfilling the role of Elijah ("he restores all things" in v.12) - this restoring primarily refers to calling people to repentance; connected to this, is Jesus' referring to His own suffering (as "Son of Man" in v.12) likely alluding to Isaiah 53:3 talking about the Messiah as suffering servant. (16) What matters most here is that, along with the preceding witnesses of John the Baptist (Mark 1:9-11), the witness of Elijah and Moses and God Himself confirm Old Testament promises about the Messiah being fulfilled as they all point to Jesus Christ, as the Messiah. (17)

The Transfiguration in Luke 9:27-36

"But I tell you truthfully, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God." **About eight days after Jesus had said these things, He took with Him Peter, John, and James, and went up on a mountain to pray. And as He was praying, the appearance of His face changed, and His clothes became radiantly white. Suddenly two men, Moses and Elijah, began talking with Jesus. They appeared in glory and spoke about His departure, which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Meanwhile Peter and his companions were overcome by sleep, but when they awoke, they saw Jesus' glory and the two men standing with Him. As Moses and Elijah were leaving, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for**

us to be here. Let us put up three shelters —one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." (He did not know what he was saying.) While Peter was speaking, a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. And a voice came from the cloud, saying, "This is My Son, whom I have chosen. Listen to Him!" After the voice had spoken, only Jesus was present with them. The disciples kept this to themselves, and in those days they did not tell anyone what they had seen.
Luke 9:27–36 (BSB)

Commentary:

Related to the other Gospel accounts and yet unique in many details, the transfiguration as recorded in Luke, provides us with a more rounded picture of Jesus and His mission. As such, the transfiguration is a representation of the fulfillment of Jesus' words about His own coming. (18) The fact that Jesus prays (v.28-29) shows us evidence of his piety (19), and His unique relationship to God the Father, since the Bible does tell us that Jesus often prays in seclusion from others (Matthew 14:23; Mark 6:46).

As Jesus prays, His face changes, and *then* His clothes become "radiantly white," (v.29) which shows that the transfiguration is from the inside out, and not any other way. (20) Only Luke records the detail of Jesus' 'departure' (Greek: exodos) in Jerusalem (v.31) as He is talking with Moses and Elijah (v.30) - which most likely refers to Christ's death, resurrection and ascension. (21) The allusion to the Old Testament exodus is enhanced by the presence of Moses. (22)

Peter's offer to "put up three shelters," (v.33) relates to the practice of constructing such huts at the Jewish festival of tabernacles (booths) (Leviticus 23:33-43; Exodus 23:16; 34:22; Deuteronomy 16:13-16), yet God's voice clarifies that Jesus as God's Son is unique and above and beyond Moses and Elijah. (23)

The Testimony of Peter about Jesus' Transfiguration in 2 Peter 1:16-21

For we did not follow cleverly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were

eyewitnesses of His majesty. For He received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to Him from the Majestic Glory, saying, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” And we ourselves heard this voice from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain. We also have the word of the prophets as confirmed beyond doubt. And you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture comes from one’s own interpretation. For no such prophecy was ever brought forth by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.
2 Peter 1:16–21 (BSB)

Commentary:

While the disciples, at the time, did not tell anyone about their experience of Jesus’ transfiguration (Luke 9:36), this changed following Christ’s resurrection and ascension, as we can see in the above passage, in which an older Peter writes about this event. Here we have Peter’s eyewitness testimony, that in conjunction with the three Gospel witnesses, creates a solid factual chain pointing to the transfiguration as a real event. (24)

What also attests to the authenticity of the transfiguration is the simplicity in which the Gospel writers and Peter, in this passage here, relate to the event. (25) All the elements in Peter’s passage (Jesus’ receiving God’s glory, God’s voice, God’s words and the unspecified mountain location) attest to the authenticity of the event.

Peter links his eyewitness testimony to the Old Testament prophetic message (v.19) of the “day” dawning, that is the day of the Lord - with God saving His people and judging those who reject Him - and the “morning star” (see Numbers 24:17; Revelation 22:16) referring to Christ’s return, by means of a night-day (dark-light) contrast. (26) The Person and power of the Holy Spirit rounds off this passage, as Peter connects all Scripture (God’s Word) to the person of Jesus Christ. Thereby, Peter affirms that - unlike all other man-made ‘religions,’ the gospel of Christ is true, just as all the events witnessed, that is Christ’s life, transfiguration, death, resurrection and ascension - Jesus is the Messiah and the only way to be saved. (27)

Conclusion:

To sum up, we realize that, not only is Christ's transfiguration a real event, it really happened in accordance with the Gospel and others eyewitnesses accounts (2 Peter 1:16-21), but also that the transfiguration uniquely and directly points to Christ as the Messiah.

As seen, Jesus has an inner circle of trusted disciples (Peter, James and John) to whom He reveals Himself at the transfiguration - who are also present as Jesus raises Jairus's daughter (Mark 5:37-43) and with Jesus in Gethsemane (Mark 14:33). (28) These three witnesses (His inner circle) at the time, are also those to whom Jesus reveals the heavenly witnesses as He communicates with Moses and Elijah. However, in Christ, this Old Testament revelation has been fulfilled. (29) By His own transformation, at the transfiguration, Jesus' deity is revealed, and confirmed by God's voice from the cloud. (30)

Also, as recorded in Luke, we learn about Jesus' 'departure' (Greek: exodos) which, taking place at Jerusalem refers to Christ's death, resurrection and ascension. (31) This means that Jesus' death was not a mistake or tragedy, but part of God's sovereign divine plan to be fulfilled in and through Christ. (32) The cross of Christ is a necessity - Jesus having been divinely approved as sin bearer for all believers - with the transfiguration inseparably linking His suffering with God's glory, hinting at the later resurrection body of Christ.

While told to be silent about the transfiguration event at the time, after the resurrection following Pentecost, Peter, James and John proclaimed this event (2 Peter 1:17) along with the good news. (34) Practically, for us as believers, the transfiguration is a reminder of the suffering we often face, but gives us hope and helps us persevere and endure during difficult times, since we are reminded - like the disciples at this event - to listen to, heed and follow Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. (35)

Notes

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May God bless you and keep you.

Pastor John

Amen.